

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Diana, democracy and popular culture

**Is Princess Diana the Most Unlikely revolutionary
of the 20th century? * Can Popular Culture
provide emotionally charged channels of
Discourse — of which the Media is incapable? *
Can National Consensus to be reached through
an Inclusive and Public Creativity? * Is this 'the
End of Deference'? * Did The Queen of Hearts
subvert the Hobbesian Spectacle of the
Sovreign? * Can an National Outpouring of Grief
really contribute to Political or Cultural change?**

by
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OUR QUEEN OF HEARTS — TRUE?

Believing that tears are an outwards sign of an inner healing process from my experience with co-counselling I let myself, albeit alone in front of the TV, join in with the national grief on the Sunday of Diana's tragic death. It was good to become part of such a groundswell of benign emotion and it made me into a Diana's death junkie for the following week.

It was also an interesting phenomenon from the viewpoint of democratic culture — a huge diversity of people initiated and invented rituals of grieving from the beginning. As they took over public spaces, without asking permission, and brought their floral tributes and messages they gradually fused a new collective cultural identity. This was not a media induced mass hysteria, as was still claimed by some 'dis-passionate' left critics, but an individually thoughtful and passionate, whilst at the same time communal, process. Some of the most creative rituals, such as the night-time tree shrines outside Kensington Palace or the act of strewing flowers onto the moving hearse, spread with extraordinary speed and cohesion.

But what was the subject of our grief? It doesn't seem enough to end with the answer "Di", even if qualified by a version of "I felt as if I knew her". After all she was not a real relative or friend, to most of us, but a symbol. Many people expressed surprise at their depth of feeling. So what was this symbol and what pain or loss did it access in so many of us? Or had we in fact come to rely, often unbeknownst to ourselves, on what Diana represented, and now suffered real loss? Or did it remind us of our own unfinished emotional business? When my own sister died of anorexia I was, at the time, unable to grieve this awful tragedy. As the week wore on this link became more apparent but did not explain everything that I was feeling. I think

Diana may also have struck a chord within our communal histories of psychic pain.

The very core of all forms of oppression, in the construction of the oppressor role, is the control of any feeling or empathy for those who are to be oppressed. Only those who have had their feelings turned to stone can coolly coerce and exploit, routinely belittle and degrade other humans. Diana refused the 'stiff upper lip' so central to the maintenance of the oppressor role model whether it is upper class, masculine, adult, white, able-bodied or whatever.

She also knew the rough edge of being oppressed as a woman. As a national leader and charismatic figure she held up values that have been almost entirely locked away in the private world of women, and boldly pushed them into the public sphere.

One of the central planks of classism is the denial of the innate intelligence and judgement of us plebs. She, herself, had failed to get any 'O' levels. She had no intellectual standing, and yet she clearly thought for herself and decided as wisely as any intellectual could, what were the priorities of the day. And underlying each of these topicalities were the ground values, not of profit or mechanistic achievement but human caring. It is this non-intellectual but somatic intuitive wisdom that so many people can identify with and which made her 'ordinary', in spite of being a Sloane.

Unlike many of the upper class dames of charity work, who conduct their good works with a good deal of condescension and at arms length, she knew the value of physical contact, and of listening with respect to each individual. Raising money for charities was not her most significant activity — after all this is what women of her class are expected to do, its part of their

traditional 'duty'. Even if the personal style with which she did it was radical.

Her radicality reached a new level when she got behind the world-wide campaign to ban land mines. This is the point, rather late in the day, when I became a fan. This unglamorous campaign really needed just the high profile presentation she was able to give it.

If we humans are to end war, and I believe we now can, we need allies from the upper classes to turn their backs on the warrior tradition that poisons the thinking of our national elite. The myth of the chivalric roots of the aristocracy has recently been revealed by radical, or simply honest, historians as a romantic gloss on a much more sordid reality. The nobles of yore were in reality little more than gangsters who ruled through terror and savagery. They were brutes with an elegant facade. War was a cult. War was seen to be a cultural necessity. War was the motor of honour. Personal value was measured in terms of a person's capacity for disciplined violence.

Thomas Hobbes described the psychic power that could be focused through the image of the of the fabulously wealthy sovereign in his book *Leviathan* published in the 17th century. The subservience of the population could be obtained without using so much direct brutality. Power could thus be extended more efficiently over a greater area and the accumulation of wealth increased.

Diana, as the Princess, subverted the mechanisms of this ancient spectacle and its power, which had anyway long been sidelined as an aspect of an often jingoistic national pride and glory. She redirected the glare onto human frailty, her own and that of all the 'rejected' she so actively empathised with. In this she broke the cardinal rule of upper class detachment. While a

sovereign exerts power by being fundamentally uncaring, Diana held people's power to care for each other in the spotlight of the sovereign spectacle. To repeat, rulers can only dominate and exploit by being emotionally immune to the suffering and ignominy of those they subjugate.

The glamour of the sovereign can still symbolically bind a nation in deference but maybe it can now also be used to highlight images of more human relations. Instead of expressing service and duty in pomp and a petrified and haughty definition of human dignity, the Diana spectacle became one which represented the ordinary frailty of all our lives. From this comes forth the sweetness of human caring and finally the courage to begin to end humans harming humans.

But the landmine issue was extending her role too far. The Palace and the section of the upper class that includes the military and the international arms industrialists and dealers may have been initially relieved at her death. But they must then have become perturbed at the scale of mass reaction. Could Diana be more dangerous in death than she was in life? Britain is the world's second largest arms exporter and has one of the oldest warrior traditions embedded into its ruling elite. It would only take our mourners to comb the arms makers out of their wind-fall investments to critically change the face of British capitalism.

There will be an ongoing struggle, as we can see by the manner in which the landmine issue was included or dropped from the array of causes expected to benefit from the new Diana fund or foundation in the week following her death. The rightist Daily Telegraph's 'Diana Memorial Fund' claimed to be intended to benefit landmine *victims*. A strategy apparently intended to distract from the issue of banning weaponry. Earl Spencer, in spite of the power of his funeral tribute, talked of the 'random violence' of landmines, as if weaponry as a whole were not a

scourge. Even the liberal wing of the ruling classes is unlikely to support a campaign which could escalate into a general banning of arms manufacture.

In the days following Diana's death a world-wide ban on land mines was held up as the most fitting monument to her memory. But as the week wore on this was mentioned less as the idea of a fund became a reality. The radical popular will to end humans harming humans will be resisted by the establishment.

Let us hope the talismanic Queen of Hearts has, with her death, sacrificially fractured the aristocratic warrior tradition which has so poisoned our politics. We need ways to redefine human dignity as openness, vulnerability and honesty, something which the mass displays of creativity surrounding the royal homesteads seemed to be expressing. We need to redefine honour and valour and to bring simple human values of caring for each other to the centre of our politics on a world scale.

In her lifetime these values often appeared, at least through the media, as dilute and aligned with weakness. What was remarkable about the outpouring of grief, from what seemed a truly broad cross-section of an often invisible British public, was in how it reinforced these unglamorous virtues. The same passion for caring that ordinary people carry too quietly through their lives suddenly seemed, in this unified expression, awesomely powerful. The establishment and press were visibly shaken.

The effect of grief on such a scale may be like a national therapy session in which people can gain deeper strength and courage in their own convictions and intrinsic worth after having these undermined by centuries of oppression.

The national outpouring of tears in Poland on the occasion of the new Polish Pope's visits and powerfully validating sermons, was one of the factors that gave rise to the emergence of

Solidarnosc. Such a change had been inconceivable in the West. Our media had been able to pick up few clues that such momentous changes might be imminent... So, what might our grief shift? What new thoughts and courage will it release? What might be the sum total of such effects?

The media attempted to accommodate the verbal expressions of grief through phone-ins which invited people's ideas on what form a monument to Diana could take. The establishment formalised and enclosed people's 'need to write' in their Books of Remembrance. But these controlled official channels were overtaken by the anarchic display of writings, framed by flowers, that were posted in the parks and on the streets. This flood of direct cultural expression was unique. This public expression redefined popular culture with a literary discourse which was open to all in a way that has never been possible before. A culture based on an active bottom-up cultural expression and values, rather than on the Art 'the great and the good' think is best for us.

Since the Chartists 150 years ago, the main hopeful change in the world has been a low bass groundswell, a drift of geological immensity towards urban democracy. A slow and uneven move towards peoples power world-wide has been inexorable. Unmapped by our learned men, unrepresented and perhaps unforeseeable in the mass media it shudders gradually forward.

In the reaction to Dianas death we saw spontaneous and autonomous cultural forms opening up. These allowed individuals to contribute to a clear collective expression which could move towards ever more direct and immediate forms of democracy. If we are to be realistic and 'demand the impossible' — an end to war and oppression — we must make channels to connect everyday caring values with their imaginative expression as a collective response. It is only through such multiple discourses

and displays that people as a whole can be aware of the power of their conjoined compassion and sense of social justice.

The media reportage which I had been glued too, had run out of ideas by Tuesday night so on Wednesday I ventured out into the real world to visit Kensington Palace to 'see for myself'. As an old lady had said on television; "You've got to have been there...", and she was right: the messages, letters, poems, rants, posters, framed photographs, collages, flags, paintings, constructions, banners, teddies, candles — all surrounded by flowers. Every flower in the world was there from garden daisies to exotic blooms that must have cost the earth, the air heavy with fragrance.

Then the thousands of people reading and contemplating and talking in hushed tones. All sorts of people — more women than men but still a lot of men. It was in the prolonged reading of this library of death and love, that the popular discourse comes out and hits you like a psychic earthquake. This rumble, surfacing explicitly and at times poetically was something that cannot come through the mass media or the art gallery system, with their inevitable layers of filters or even hope to be fully expressed in any linear text.

Intellectuals have heard much about the 'crisis of representation' — it makes a very concrete sense here. On the TV you cannot peruse the messages in your own way, adding your own poem — nor smell the fragrance, nor sense the scale of passion for the basic and direct values of human love and caring that are so eloquently expressed here. The media is unable to represent what is essential to human survival: the collective complexity and emotional dimension of the discourses necessary for cultural re-evaluation. This is a critical lack in what is supposed to be our main tool of communication. In this event

people abandoned their TVs and took to public open spaces to display their own creations and be together.

The communion of a good rave or festival, or the euphoria of a football match (even with fixed seating) has something of the base atmosphere — of feeling together, but perhaps without the ability to express and share personal feelings. The significance of this aspect of the event was not 'Diana' but the individual writing and making, and then the people reading and listening. In the eighties women surrounded Greenham Common airbase and decorated the vast perimeter fence. Greenham was in the same league but without the personification of goodness and loss which can be so moving, and without the urban setting allowing access to so many thousands.

It showed a direct form of people's publishing. Those who had taken time to write so carefully could then watch TV and see strangers reading their work. They could see their work becoming part of complex and dynamic cultural discourses which would spiral away from the sites. Established power has always been threatened by such direct unmediated mass communication.

Many of the messages would have been considered treason in my childhood. It was practically a people's coronation — Diana was given her HRH back; the Queen was publicly castigated for her stoicism on the railings of palaces and Prince Charles was asked to abdicate in favour of William — on the understanding he would take after his mother!

To my disappointment the land-mine issue was mentioned only rarely. The overwhelmingly theme was love and death. It reminded me of the content of sixties pop songs but somehow it seemed more radical in this context. It could be that it's my analysis that's changed but I felt that the definition of 'those who

reign over us' was being challenged. After a couple of hours reading at Kensington Palace I was left with a sense of a profoundly caring, magnanimous, wise and morally responsible population.

In British popular traditions there was, until recently, a custom of allowing a commoner to become 'King for a day' at a certain time of the year. I felt that perhaps we could choose our future monarchs on just this basis. A good person could be chosen democratically to be 'Queen for the Year' — the needs of the tourist industry would be satisfied and someone, who deserved it, could have a majestic time.

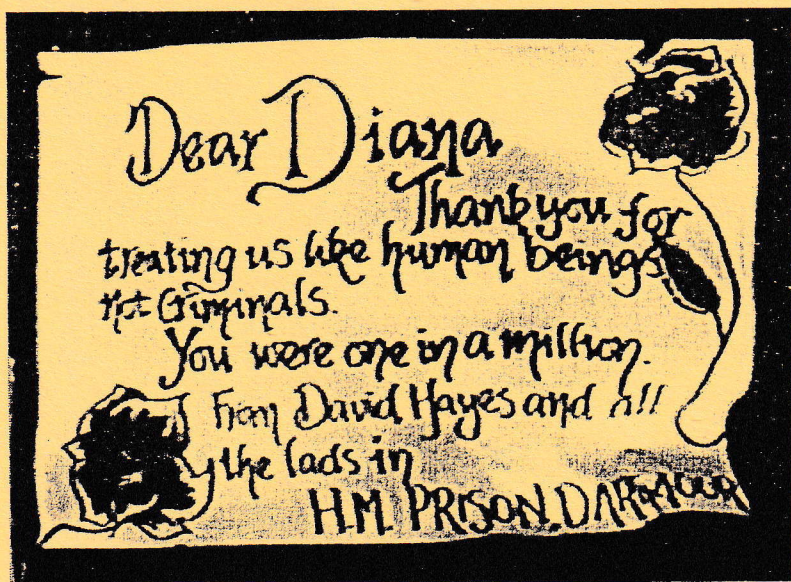
But the more serious point is, that to have a democracy in which people seriously take power, the population must feel confident in its own ability to be heard and to lead, to make the right decisions based on a moral consensus. This depends on a culture which embodies the connectivity by which this can happen. It must be able to sense a collective will directly — not indirectly through the mass media or via an isolated computer screen.

In this intense week our self-image of what it means to be British has been changed from a reserved and exclusive image derived from the ultimate oppressor class — the imperialist rulers — to a warm and inclusive image derived from its commoners. Democracy may have come of age. An old oppressive model of what it is to be human has been blown away. It has taken an emotional catharsis that engulfed middle England and the sacrifice of a 'good' Princess to make it possible.

At the funeral in Westminster Abbey applause initiated by the crowd outside in response to her brothers tribute, swept in through the half open West door. This reversed the hierachial flow of command and smashed the protocol of 'what one does'

at funerals. Clearly the public can restructure obsolete cultural convention by taking up direct forms of expression.

Stefan Szczelkun. 9-9-97 (Revised 5-11-97).



Poster on the railings of Kensington Palace.